

WINNING OVER DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

PURPOSE: This operational instruction is provided to assist Air Force club management and staff in dealing with difficult customers.

SCOPE: This guide applies to club employees and management personnel.

GENERAL: The nature of your job requires that you sometimes work with customers who may drive you up a wall. Regardless of whether your customers are rude, frustrated, confused, or irate, most minor clashes don't have to turn into guerrilla warfare. This guide provides you six basic steps that will help you deal with difficult customers

GUIDANCE:

1. **Let the customer vent.** When your customers are upset they want two things: First they want to express their feelings, and then they want the problem solved. The customer letting off steam can be viewed as overpowering to the first employee they talk to. Trying to resolve the problem without first listening to the customers' feelings never works. Only after the customer has vented can they begin to hear what you have to say. Nothing heats up a customer with a problem faster than being told to calm down while they are venting. The best plan is to stay quiet and not make matters worse by interrupting the customer. Avoid using the following list of words and phases:

- "You don't seem to understand."
- "You must be confused"
- "You have to."
- "We won't...We never...We can't."
- "You're wrong."
- "It's not our policy."

When customers vent, they are expressing frustration, annoyance, disappointment, and maybe anger. Of all the emotions, anger is the one you are the most likely to take personally because anger is an in-your-face emotion. Remember that you are simply the person the customer(s) is venting to, don't take it personally; let the customer vent!

2. **Avoid getting trapped in a negative filter.** The friction between you and a difficult customer is often worsened by how you interpret his or her behaviors. Take a minute and think of some of the names that you call your difficult customers—not to their face, but privately, under your breath. A negative filter is born as soon as you label the customer. Here are some of the most common negative filters:

- jerk
- stupid
- liar
- clueless
- moron

--loser

The way out of a negative filter is switching to a service filter. You can do so by asking yourself the question: **What does this customer need and how can I provide it?** This question provides you with an alternative filter because as soon as you ask it, your focus changes. The negative filters instantly slide into the background, and the service filter slides into the foreground.

3. Express Empathy to the Customer: Empathy means appreciating and understanding someone else's feelings while not necessarily agreeing with them. Letting the customer know you understand why they are upset builds a bridge of rapport between you and them. Empathy also means having to say you're sorry. Saying "I'm sorry" to a customer does not imply that you or the club did anything wrong; it simply conveys that you are genuinely sorry that the customer has had a bad experience. By using a genuinely warm and caring tone when talking to the customer, you will enhance the meaning and effectiveness of empathic phrases. The types of words or phrases that best express empathy are as follows:

--"I can see why you feel that way."
--"I see what you mean."
--"That must be very upsetting."
--"I understand how frustrating this must be."
--"I'm sorry about this."

4. Begin Active Problem Solving: Gather any additional information you need. Customers sometimes leave out critical information because they think it is unimportant or they just forget. Double-check all the facts. Upset customers rarely present the facts of their story in a neat little package, and remember, there are always two sides to EVERY STORY. You may have to do some detective work to make sure that you understand everything.

5. Mutually Agree on the Solution: Once you gather all the facts, you need to work with your customer to come up with an acceptable solution to the problem. When you have agreed on how to resolve the problem, explain the steps that you will take to implement the solution. Don't promise what you can't deliver. Be honest and realistic when telling the customer what you will do. It is better to under promise and over deliver. Doing so sets an expectation in the customer's mind that you will have a good chance of meeting and, hopefully, exceeding.

6. Follow Up: Always follow up with your customer, by phone, e-mail, or letter to ensure that the solution worked to customer's satisfaction. Effective follow-up also includes fixing the procedures that caused the problem to begin with. By spending time resolving internal service delivery problems, you may prevent them from occurring in the future.

SUMMARY: You will find that the more you use the six steps, the better you will become at winning over difficult customers.